

Commentary

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Corresponding author:

John Charles Burns; Email: jcbkent@gmail.com

Abstract

The deaths in the Antarctic of Captains Robert Falcon Scott and Lawrence “Titus” Oates are the most examined in almost all exploration. However, one object, until today unknown, gives a clue to the real story of the last three days of the *Terra Nova* expedition leaders. This is the sextant that Captain Scott had with him throughout his career until his death, passed from Kathleen Scott to Peter Scott and thence to its current owner. The sextant, its history and the meaning of the relic are set out before the public for the first time.

Background

As we near the end of the first quarter of the 21st century, 110 years after the first and most impressive exhibition of Captain Robert Falcon Scott’s expedition relics in Earl’s Court, one might be forgiven to believe that nothing is left to interest the current generation in the Heroic Age of Exploration and, in particular, the *Terra Nova* expedition and nothing new to intrigue polar academic students (Higgitt, 2017).

And yet there is . . .

Thousands of books and articles in many languages have been written on the Terra Nova expedition and its sad conclusion, examining every aspect of the planning and execution of the expedition and its scientific contributions, as well as the competence and character of all the principal members (Cherry-Garrard, 1922).

Studies have been made about the rise of interest in polar exploration, and as that interest has waxed and waned in the wake of societal changes, exhibitions have been organised to reawaken public awareness of this branch of the geographical sciences, from the earliest years of the 19th century to the Second World War. It is interesting that the contents of these exhibitions have been termed “relics” from the major exhibition of Sir John Franklin’s expedition in 1859 (Murray, 2017). However, it has been shown in comprehensive studies that the term “relic” lost its depth of meaning in the heroic narrative of polar exploration, when Scott’s expeditions and the *Terra Nova* disaster took over the public imagination.

It is appropriate, therefore, to speak of a relic that has only now been brought into public view, a relic of Captain Robert Falcon Scott CVO, which is unknown despite being one of the most iconic possessions of a naval officer and provides new evidence for the final days of the Terra Nova expedition.

Perhaps the most important activity and responsibility of the naval officer and master of a ship is to know his position on the sea. Some officers would be navigation specialists, but every officer had to be confident in his wayfinding skills, and from the first days of being a midshipman, they relied on their education and the quality of their instrument, their personal sextant.

For all but 80 years, a sextant, made by one of the finest manufacturers, Troughton and Simms, has rested on a library bookcase in a private home. This is the sextant that was with Captain Scott from his earliest years in the Navy to his last great journey. On the plate attached to the index arm is his inscription: “R.F. Scott.”

R. F. Scott’s sextant

I will describe the sextant in its ideal form and then look at the details of Scott’s own instrument. I will then lay out the provenance, how it came to its final owner and more importantly why. In conclusion, it is right to demonstrate in some detail how we can be sure that Captain Scott had his sextant with him to the end. Most would assert that a captain and his sextant would hardly be separated, but it is interesting to confirm in this particular case, since this then leads to a new understanding of the circumstances around the final journey and those characters.

This is a double-framed sextant, a type designed and first manufactured by Edward Troughton, patented in 1788. The firm of Troughton and Simms dates from the time that Edward took on William Simms in 1826. It was merged in 1922 with Thomas Cooke and Sons, to form Cooke, Troughton and Simms, after Vickers took a controlling interest in Cooke.

The firm produced hundreds of astronomical instruments such as sextants, theodolites, mural circles and transit circles for observatories around the world and for the Navy. The high

regard in which this type and make of sextant was held (referred to more than once as the “holy grail” of sextants: HJs Instrumenten Catalogue, 2010) is due to the strength of the double-framed design and its solid pillars so that it resisted the warping that other types were prone to. As a result, once purchased, naval officers simply did not need or wish to change.

Given the quality of a Troughton and Simms sextant, there should be no surprise that not only did officers keep their personal sextants with them throughout their service but that their price was such that a second-hand sextant could be all that was affordable at the start of a career. In fact, we have very good evidence for the regard in which these sextants were held, so much so that they could be passed from one officer to another as a gesture of friendship and high esteem. Instruments might be given as gifts between officers, appropriated as recompense, absorbed as state property and disputed between friends (Barford, 2017, pp. 431–456).

A superb example of all the qualities described above is a Jesse Ramsden sextant, in the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich (ID number NAV1140). From the inscriptions on the instrument, this was given to a captain by an admiral in 1851. The instrument was made in 1792, so was 60 years old at the time of the gift (Dunn, 2010). Noteworthy is the fact that the instrument has been in the possession of the admiral from his time as a midshipman. This point is relevant to the history of Captain Scott’s sextant and its journey back from the South Pole.

Our sextant is not the bright polished example such as that in Greenwich, mentioned above. This has an oxidised brass frame and an oxidised brass arc, signed Troughton & Simms, London, with an inset silver scale divided from -5 to 150° . A serial number 2365 is engraved on the central front pillar of the frame, but the records of Troughton and Simms were destroyed in the 1920s, so the dating can only be approximate. The instrument is much damaged in those parts that were elevated: the shades have gone, although the reflecting index and horizon mirrors remain, the vernier scale and wheel survive, but not the scale magnifier that was also broken away. Its legs remain, and all other parts, though no telescopes, survive with it.

The condition of the instrument raises a serious question, and the journey by which it was passed from Captain Scott to the current owner is almost as intriguing as the fact of its survival. In fact, the lost relic can be shown to be a silent witness to one of the most dramatic episodes of the Heroic Age of Exploration, and its story is remarkable.

The provenance of the instrument is impeccable. Indeed, there is only one generation between the current owner and Captain Scott himself. Therefore, the tale is better told tracing back from today’s location to Scott.

My father, Charles Burns, was a noted physicist and researcher in optics; however, his war years were as a Scientific Officer in the Admiralty, where he worked on the development of radar and Identification Friend or Foe systems, setting up radar stations around the British Isles, testing systems and flying in Swordfish aircraft off carriers for low visibility operations.

Joining the Admiralty immediately from Aberdeen University, in 1940, he spent time at Telecommunications Research Establishment (TRE) Malvern and Fareham, around Portsmouth and Bristol, as well as on journeys to Scotland and Northern Ireland. It was to him that Peter Scott gave his own father’s sextant as a deeply personal symbol of regard and mutual understanding of each other’s experiences, as the Second World War drew to a close. Why that arose can be deduced from the parallel lives and

experiences between the two men, at first glance occupying different spheres of Scottish and English society, but nevertheless not so distant.

Sir Peter Scott, as he became, was a sub-lieutenant and then lieutenant commander in the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve and then Royal Navy, made famous in the period by his development of camouflage schemes for the Navy, which were spectacularly successful. A brief outline of his war service may seem to be focussed on command of Steam Gun Boats, HMS *Broke* and Atlantic convoys (Scott, 1946), but in fact, he was to be found in many places around the British Isles, at the same time as my father. Peter Scott’s interests were very wide, almost insatiable, demonstrated by his Olympic-level skating prowess, as well as a continuous contradictory love of shooting and wildlife. This was a lasting struggle in his mind until he gave up shooting for good after the war (Scott, 1941a; Berry, 1990).

One important strand in his research and inquisitiveness was the science of light, specifically how it can be tricked through camouflaging paint, and he was awarded the Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE) for this work. The Peter Scott designs were intended for anti-submarine warfare and used on ships up to destroyer size, but by mid-1941, they had been officially adopted by the camouflage section which produced a range of designs based directly on Peter Scott’s patterns. These official patterns were given the name “Western Approaches” because of the area in which escort vessels wearing this type usually operated.

Peter Scott’s interest was not limited to the effect of light in a camouflage setting, but in these war years, he clearly was experimenting with other optical applications. A letter from a Bristol optician to Scott in May 1943 includes a sketch of prism binoculars with a battery, bulb and green glass screen as a suggestion for use in night work (MS from Robert Lyne, 1943). Interestingly, Scott also had started a collection of German naval optical instruments at this time, and this extended to the Japanese as well after the war. As has been noted, he “must have possessed a fine knowledge of naval and aircraft optics . . .” (Derbyshire, 2021). Indeed, he must. As the Admiralty expert in optics, my father, Charles Burns, was the one to whom he went for advice and expertise on how U-boats would see a target (Scott, 1941b).

It has become clear that Charles Burns’ birthplace, Stonehaven near Aberdeen, was rather more connected with the Scott family than might have been thought. One of the prominent citizens who lived in retirement in his hometown of Stonehaven was George Murray FRS, formerly of the Natural History Museum. The Royal Geographical Society (RGS) has a letter from George Murray FRS of Bridgefield Terrace in Stonehaven from September 1909 to Captain Scott, regarding the *Discovery* expedition. Murray began his connection with Captain Scott as Director of Civilian staff for the 1901–1904 expedition, and Sir Clements Markham wrote a preface for the first edition of the *Antarctic Manual* in 1901, which Murray led in its compilation. There are references in Peter Scott’s writings to his travels around Scotland on many occasions during and after the war, some of which I will return to, but touchingly, the connection with Stonehaven was not forgotten, both as an adjunct to Peter Scott’s appointment as Chancellor of Aberdeen University and knowing my father’s history. Much later, a letter from Cllr Brown-Blackland of Burgh of Stonehaven, written on Burns’ Night 1973, congratulates Peter Scott on his knighthood.

With this in mind, one can understand that there were several points in common with Charles Burns, not just in research on optics and radar but even with his university and place of birth. Indeed, Charles’ father, Dr Charles Burns, was provost of

Stonehaven from 1923 to 1932 and again from 1935 until dying in office in April 1945. These are the background indications of how Peter Scott would have met and found much in common with my father. The culmination of this process is to establish why and in what circumstances Peter Scott gave his own father's sextant to Charles Burns. The key lies with Peter Scott and, further back in time, with his father and the mythology that grew up around the *Terra Nova* expedition.

The gift

The occasion of the gift was specific and special: a dinner in the captain's cabin of HMS *Victory* in Portsmouth Dockyard, which took place in 1947, attended by a small group of scientific and naval officers closing out their mutual experiences during the war. There is no doubt that Charles and Peter had crossed paths in numerous places during the war years, perhaps the high point being when Peter Scott took part in the aftermath of the D-Day landings. For some months previously, he had been at Fort Southwick near Fareham, and one of his letters in March 1944 speaks of the constant work with 36-h shifts. This was on the disposition of the fleet in preparation for the landings in Normandy. Shortly afterwards, Scott was in command of the small party that was tasked with securing the installation of an advance mobile radar station in the forward positions (Huxley, 1993) for which Charles was the expert in setting up and calibration.

This was perhaps the most important but far from the only joint venture that Scott and Burns took part in. As early as 1941, Jane Howard, fiancée of Peter Scott, wrote to him about one of her relatives being posted as a Fleet Air Arm engineer to TRE Malvern (Howard, 1941).

In September 1944, Scott wrote the Advanced Tactical Training memo, in which point four concerned the direction of ships by radar control and also zone torpedo firing guided by radar (Scott, 1944). At an earlier date, there was an incident indicative of the relationship between them, during the laying at anchor of the carrier that they were on, off Arran in Lamlash Bay. Both in the First and especially in the Second World War, capital ships and carriers would anchor in the shelter of Holy Island opposite Lamlash (Campbell, 2007; Davies, 1967). Charles' mother had her house at Lamlash, and he told me the story of his asking the captain for permission to go ashore and see his mother and sister. This was granted, and he and Scott were the only ones to disembark at the harbour, carrying only their dancing shoes and disappointing many of the women of the town who had expected more of the crew to appear (Turbett, 2023). For Burns and Scott to come ashore with their dancing shoes was not wholly unexpected; both were very well known as excellent Scottish dancers (Cambridge University Library MSS, A108).

In his letters to his wife, Jane Howard, Scott writes about exercises at sea from HMS *Nimrod*, the shore base for training in anti-submarine warfare around Argyll, and how he drove in a bus to Loch Eck and Loch Fyne to the sea at the Mull of Kintyre (Scott, 1944b). As mentioned above, Scott's work on camouflage was as an anti-submarine measure. The worlds of optics and the characteristics of light, as well as radar, were mutual interests of Scott and Burns.

During this crucial 1944 period, both Scott and Burns were active in the radar research establishments around Portsmouth and also spent considerable time in the west of Scotland. Despite the heavy workload, Scott's mind was by no means fixed solely on his

naval duties: among many other things, he was clearly proud of and working out the details of a rocket-propelled net to capture geese for study purposes (Scott, 1944b).

We now come to an understanding of Scott's frame of mind over the next year or so, which leads to his divesting himself of his father's effects and relics. Scott suffered several psychological blows from 1945 to 1947, which likely affected his subsequent actions.

One of his closest friends and confidantes, Bryan Scurfield, who commanded HMS *Broke* with Peter Scott as his first lieutenant, was killed in the last moments of the war, during an evacuation march of POWs to Lübeck in April 1945 when the group he was in was shot up by Allied aircraft. A more senseless way to end a valued and brave life could be hard to imagine. Scurfield was older than Scott by eight years, just as Scott was seven years older than Burns and was the man to whom Scott would confide his ambitions and plans. Scurfield had been one of the first to request his ship, HMS *Bedouin*, be camouflaged in the Scott pattern (Scurfield, 1941). In April 1942, he had written to Scott, in response to his ambition for advancement, "...as someone who has always had all he wanted... and finds it difficult to adjust to humdrum life" (Scurfield, 1942).

By 1946, Scott was also separated from his wife of only a couple of years and would divorce in the following year. His letters show an understandable fluctuation of emotion and decision throughout this time. And then in July 1947, his mother, Kathleen (Lady Kennett), died.

It seems most likely that this was the point that the dam of Scott's emotions could finally break. We have noted previously the long struggle in his mind over the preservation or taking of the life of wild fowl, his constant seeking after excellence in so many different endeavours, succeeding exceptionally, yet not focussing on one over another. There is good evidence that Scott was manifesting his ambiguous and paradoxical feelings towards his father through these activities Sear, 1969). There is also no doubt at all that Scott was troubled, perhaps even tormented by the legend of his father's expedition and death (Bratby, 1990), a true abandonment experience for that toddler that does not fade with time.

With this background, Kathleen's death made Scott face up to how his mother's legacy and the legacy of his father's memory in the public conscience would be laid to rest. The terms of Kathleen Scott's will were clear, leaving Peter Scott "all the books pictures furniture medals silver and relics of expeditions and all other things in my possession that belonged to his father Captain Robert Falcon Scott CVO RN or are associated with him and his work."

We can see how Peter Scott began this process quite quickly, with donations and distribution of those legacy relics to relevant institutions. It was during this period that Peter Scott handed over to Charles Burns the last and most personal of his father's possessions, the sextant which had been with his father for most of his life and was now a ghostly remnant, reminder and witness to that last dramatic episode. With that gift, he both freed himself of the legacy and yet handed to Charles a valued object, which Scott understood would still be revered in the hands of a man who could identify with so much of what Peter had experienced. Charles had lost his own father at the end of the war, who had died from complications arising from cold and hypothermia in the hills around Aberdeen and Stonehaven. Curiously, an earlier relative, John Burnes, had also died in a snow drift around Stonehaven in late 1826 (Rogers, 1877). So, there was perhaps a subconscious link with the fates of all those in the wilds of the Antarctic.

The journey from the Antarctic

Now that the circumstances of the family Burns acquiring the relic are explained, we reach the most vital part of the enquiry, the events surrounding how the sextant was damaged and the transfer of the sextant from the death tent and equipment in the hands of Dr Atkinson and his rescue party of 1913.

We have shown in this study that a naval officer and his sextant are rarely parted, except for an “upgrade,” where possible or needed or as a gift. Yet, with Captain Scott’s sextant, we should go further and demonstrate this truth for two reasons: first, to clarify assumptions that have been made over the years in many publications and, second, to present the exciting prospect of demonstrating what was mentioned right at the beginning of this article, which centres around the most famous and “revered scenes in exploration,” Captain Oates’ exit from the tent, to which we will return shortly.

Many studies, which compare and contrast the methods and leadership styles of Scott and Amundsen, delve into the use or otherwise of dogs and ponies, mechanised transport and depot quantities and state without comment that Amundsen established the position of the South Pole by sextant and Scott with a theodolite (Hinks, 1944). A further conclusion sometimes drawn is that this meant the other instrument was excluded from their inventory – far from it, as noted in the Admiralty Records (1910).

Considering the use and custom of both instruments, it is right to question why this assumption is made. The reverse is true. Frank Debenham lists in the definitive report on the expedition that each naval officer had his own sextant, not surprising but needs to be stated (Debenham, 1923).

In fact, it becomes clear that the origin of the assertion is not in any primary source but from the newspaper reports and popular press articles immediately following the conclusion of the *Terra Nova* expedition.

The *Illustrated London News* is a good source to begin with. Very popular and detailed in its descriptions and illustrations, it had covered substantially the loss and then partial rediscovery of “relics” from the Sir John Franklin expedition. The drawing of relics of the Franklin expedition published in the 1859 Supplement of the *Illustrated London News* shows the most important finds, including what is captioned Franklin’s own sextant, a likely double-framed Troughton and Simms one (Nature, 1930, describes these same relics in another major exhibition).

In early 1913, the *Illustrated London News* features a two-page spread with a neatly balanced and contrasting text and photographs (Illustrated London News, 1913). The illustrated sextant purports to be of the type which Amundsen used, but not the actual one. As the balancing feature, a theodolite is pictured “of the type” as used by Captain Scott. This does not mean that either man was without both types of instrument and in this I can agree with Huntford (Huntford, 1979 p. 389). In fact, Huntford goes on to illustrate the very reason for taking on the weight of extra instruments and a variety, for redundancy in the inevitable likelihood of an accident. “Amundsen had intended bringing a theodolite for the Polar observations alone. But both his instruments had been damaged, so he had to make do with a sextant instead” (Huntford, 1979, p. 538).

In 1913, the first major exhibition of relics from the Scott expedition was displayed at Earl’s Court, arranged by Cecil Meares. Although the concept was approved by Kathleen Scott and those close to the expedition, Lady Scott (as she was known at that time) was not at all content with the way the items had been used

(Huxley, 1977). Most evocative was perhaps the display of the inner lining tent, which was brought back by the rescue party, led by Dr Atkinson. This was among all the other objects collected by the rescue party from the tent and from the base camp Hut. As the rescue party goes to the trouble of dismantling the inner tent, as well as bringing the belongings to Earl’s Court, the sextant and Amundsen’s “of English make” sextant will also be brought. Dr Atkinson took a close and long-lasting interest over several years in settling the objects brought back to Kathleen Scott in order.

We see an indication of the chaos after the expedition had to leave without Scott and his companions, in the way that some objects were mislaid. Dr Atkinson writes in June 1913 to Kathleen Scott, “I have looked for the flag in the Polar gear and it is not there. Do you want his garments to be sent. The men are very anxious for a sock or something” (Atkinson, 1913). Later, once the exhibition at Earl’s Court was taken down, Scott’s personal effects that had been part of it went astray again and only eventually were reunited with Lady Scott (Atkinson, 1914).

The clearest evidence to demonstrate Scott’s use of his sextant would be photographs, but even though this was the most photographed expedition of the era, I have not found a surviving example with Scott taking a sighting. We have Frank Worsley photographed once on the way, but not Scott himself. Similarly, we do not have any surviving photographs of the principal navigator, Bowers, taking a sighting, leading one to the conclusion that the action is so routine and essential to the safe passage of the party that it was not considered interesting enough to be photographed frequently. We do have a well-known photograph of a member of the party, Lieutenant Henry Rennick, in pristine white sea boots looking through a sextant on its stand. This was a Ponting photograph taken in 1911 during the time that he was teaching Scott about photography and is clearly staged as an example (Royal Geographical Society collection S0004202).

It may be noted that I have spoken about “surviving” photographs because it is quite possible that some lost photographs would have been of Scott with his sextant. The evidence is in the two series of Polar expedition cigarette cards issued probably in 1915 and 1916 (Codling, 2011). The second series is supported by surviving correspondence with the publishers, which Rosamunde Codling analyses in depth in her article on the cigarette cards. She points out that in both series, the issue of copyright was a delicate one since the publication of the photographs and the reports of the expedition were under way and unfinished.

The printers were Mardon, Son and Hall, and a letter from Mardon, dated 27 November 1913, states, “In accordance with their recent letter they [Player] want us to approach Commander Evans and see if he will act as Editor for a new series of 25 subjects, 20 of the illustrations to be from photographs of the Scott Expedition which he may have and which have not been published in the book.” That these unpublished photographs were used is confirmed in June 1914 by A.L. Britton, a Mardon executive, to Evans, “it is desired that the new issue should consist of 20 illustrations relative to the Scott expedition from photos not previously published in book form . . .” As Codling concludes, Evans’ skill in map drawing and surveying could be used to work from photographs, and many of the illustrations in the second series derived from Ponting’s work but are the efforts of a draughtsman rather than an artist (Codling, 2011, p. 179).

Let us turn to the fate of Scott’s sextant in the Antarctic and why it returned in its current condition. This can be derived through our appreciation of how the last heroes of exploration were treated in the public mind and academic analysis during the 20th century.

Since there are only a small number of primary sources for the details of the last journey to the South Pole, the diaries of the participants, principally of course that of Captain Scott himself, must provide the accepted view of that journey as the heroic and ultimately tragic struggle to survive (Crane, 2005; “If readers were to be allowed to come to an independent judgement of the man, the crucial thing was to let Scott and his expedition members speak through their letters and diaries.”). Kathleen Scott wrote to the RGS Secretary in March 1913, “just had the splendid privilege of reading my husband’s diary – the last entries are the most magnificent inspiring reading . . .” (Scott, 1912). This was very true in the first half of the 20th century, and then the debunking process began (Tosh, 2005). “Every hero invites a debunking, but few have suffered as Scott did at Huntford’s hands. Scott, he argued, was a poor leader with little foresight who endangered men in his charge, a reckless and careless planner who trusted to luck, an ambitious naval officer who was competitive and vain.” (Griffiths, 1998).

The process is described most clearly by Sir Ranulph Fiennes (Fiennes, 2003), and he correctly focusses on one particular proponent of the destruction of the Scott myth, Roland Huntford. This is set out in Huntford’s book (Huntford, 1979), which became the principal source for generations of studies (Crace, 2008). The problem, as Fiennes and others have pointed out, is that there is no actual primary evidence for the assertions that are made. Karen May and George Lewis at the Scott Polar Research Institute (SPRI) more recently examined in detail the Huntford version (May, Lewis, 2014) and demolished the journalistic conclusions drawn from those unsubstantiated claims (May, Lewis, 2015) by such otherwise serious writers as Ben Macintyre (Macintyre, 2013). Although a later book by Stephanie Barczewski (Barczewski, 2007) is criticised by Karen May, she still acknowledges that the thesis about the changing reputations of Scott and Shackleton is well founded (May, 2012).

May challenges Huntford’s statement that Scott’s writings read “like a long suicide note.” Scott did not write at the Pole (as is regularly quoted): “Now for the run home and a desperate struggle. I wonder if we can do it.” This quotation was posthumously edited. Scott actually wrote “Now for the run home and a desperate struggle to get the news through first. I wonder if we can do it” (May, 2013).

The discussion about Scott’s state of mind and indirectly those of his companions is very pertinent to understanding how the sextant most likely came to be in its broken and damaged state. We know that Scott made Wilson hand out the opium from the medicine cabinet, “The means of ending our troubles, so that any one of us may know how to do so.” What we or he will do, God knows, says Scott at one point. It is only about three days later that Oates’ condition is shown to be beyond hope and he begged them to leave him in his sleeping bag. Scott then wrote Oates “slept through the night before last, hoping not to wake, but he woke in the morning – yesterday. It was blowing a blizzard. He said ‘I am just going outside and may be some time.’ He went out into the blizzard and we have not seen him since.”

That was the sentiment that echoed through the years and is known by young and old even to this day. Scott also said, “they had determined not to take the opium to die in their tracks” (Young, 1995). The most likely sequence of events, however, is almost certain by the condition of the sextant. Cherry-Garrard describes in his diary of 14 November 1912 how they searched for Oates:

What we took to be the mule party ahead proved to be the old pony walls 26 miles from One Ton. There was here a bit of sacking on the cairn and Oates’

bag. Inside the bag was the theodolite and his finnesko and socks. One of the finnesko was slit down the front as far as the leather beackets, evidently to get his bad foot into it. This was fifteen miles from the last camp, and I suppose they had brought on his bag for three or four miles in case they might find him still alive.

It is clear that Scott no longer had the theodolite with him, so how would he navigate? At this point, he had two sextants: his own and the one left by Amundsen together with the letter to King Haakon. Judging by the discussion over the issuing of the opium and the extreme condition that all were in, it is hardly believable that no one raised a voice in seeking to end this misery in sleep. Simon-Ekeland (2024) challenges this very point in a recent paper on anger and fear among Polar explorers.

While admissions of fear were well received because they made a story compelling, anger was an inappropriate emotion on a narrated polar expedition. Robert Falcon Scott, in *The Voyage of the ‘Discovery,’* used “anger” or “angry” mostly to describe the behaviour of animals encountered, not that of the members of the expedition. Obviously, no one would believe that there was never a moment of something resembling anger among individuals living together for many months in an environment that could be unwelcoming. However, it was usually omitted in the speeches and books (Alp, 2024).

My conclusion is the opposite of the infamous inference by Huntford that Scott in some way drove Oates out to suicide. The evidence provided here points to the potential of a sudden furious argument with Oates, maddened by pain and suffering and unable to go on, lashing out. The exact reason for such an outburst is unknown, but I speculate that he potentially wanted more opium as his share may have been lost. Such an altercation, possibly with an instrument such as a heavy theodolite, may well have been responsible for breaking the sextant’s more delicate attachments.

So it is that we can trace the great explorer’s most personal and long-lasting possession from its sudden and violent end as a usable instrument to its return to Kathleen Scott and thence to Peter Scott. As is fitting for a naval officer’s most important possession, it remained in the hands of Peter Scott until it could be settled with a man who would both cherish its significance and being an optics scientist might even restore it. In the event, my father, Charles, chose to preserve the memory of that potential flash of anger and despair, which eventually led to this expedition and their leader remaining paramount in the public consciousness of geographical exploration.

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I extend my gratitude to the RGS Library and its librarian, an institution of which I am proud to be a fellow and which has a deep connection with Captain Scott. Their assistance has been invaluable in this research journey.

Cambridge, being the repository of much of our source material, deserves special mention. The Manuscript Department of the Cambridge University Library, which houses Kathleen Scott’s diaries and a significant portion of Peter Scott’s archive, has been extremely generous with their time and resources.

The SPRI in Cambridge, a global hub for Antarctic studies, has provided exceptional assistance, with Robert Headland deserving a special mention.

Lastly, I am thankful for the insightful conversations with Falcon Scott at the beginning of my research and towards the end with Dr David M Wilson, the great-nephew of the master draughtsman who rests with Scott. Their inputs have been very helpful in shaping this research.

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